

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 188

CS 204 683

AUTHOR Hampsten, Elizabeth
 TITLE Rural Woman Writers: Beginnings of Selfhood; I am not Aristocratic.
 PUB DATE [78]
 NOTE 13p.; Study prepared at the University of North Dakota
 EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *American Literature; Authors; *Diaries; *Females; *Letters (Correspondence); Literary Analysis; *Lower Class; Nineteenth Century Literature; *Rural Population; Twentieth Century Literature

ABSTRACT

Rural working-class women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are rarely heard from as writers. The letters and diaries of such women that are available give virtually no information about culture, politics, or the arts, and they practically never contain an opinion. Instead, they provide minute, repetitive observations, with occasional flashes of insight. The women wrote not to make distinctions but to assert a pattern. Their writing contains a strong sense of the presence of other women in their consciousness, while men are apt to be blurred or peripheral. Frank discussions about death, sex, birth control, the weather, health and disease, and the price of food are common to this literature. (Examples from women's letters and diaries are included.) (TJ)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

ED165188

Elizabeth Hampsten
English Department
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, 58202

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth Hampsten

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION OR INDICATING IT POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Rural Woman Writers: Beginnings of Selfhood

I am not Aristocratic

Although there is a strong tradition in American letters of working class men as authors (James Baldwin, Arthur Miller, Theodore Roethke, the list would be very long), among women, Tillie Olsen's is one of the very few names that comes to mind. Willa Cather, Emily Dickinson, Mary Macarthy, all grew up in families of the upper-middle or professional classes, and they were better educated than their contemporaries, men or women. Our idea of writing style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is the style of men or of privileged women; we hardly know how working class women have written. Even recent historical studies based on women's private writings, like The Bonds of Womanhood by Nancy F. Cott, or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's essay on friendships published in the first issue of Signs, are based largely on writings by women of the upper middle class. And May Pinzer, of The Mamie Papers, though very poor and experienced in prostitution and drugs, says she wants again to work as a journalist.¹ My hope in this essay is to describe the literature of a class of women who have been silent; theirs is a literature with few resemblances either to public literature of the period or to the private writing of men or of upper-class women. To reach it, one must read letters and diaries, for their perceptions are recorded nowhere else.

These women whose letters and diaries I have been reading all are rural and working class (to use that unsatisfactory term for lack of a better). None is wealthy, though only a few are intermittently very poor. Some earn a living--as hotel chambermaid, proprietor of a store, several as seamstresses;

C 5224683

and some depend on the earnings of husbands or fathers who chop wood, load cargo on produce boats, perform odd jobs, seldom specified. Several share homesteading or farming with parents or husband. (None in my selections, happens to be a foreign imigrant.) As one women puts it, "I am not Aristocratic and am not wealthy neither one."² They have had enough schooling to write fairly standard English in a legible hand. They give virtually no information about culture, politics, or the arts and they almost never express an opinion. They observe: minutely, repetitively, in flashes sometimes that show what we had not seen elsewhere. Such reading, admittedly, takes patience.

Men write in order to make distinctions, to say that some events are more important than others, and all of us are schooled to do the same when we learn to write. But the women whose letters and diaries I am reading write in order to assert a pattern and to blurr the distinctions between recurring and unique events. For them, keeping the pattern intact day after day is the mark of the well regulated and successful life. To illustrate: Grace DeCou wrote daily entries for over forty years; the one for December 18, 1893 is typical:

Tuesday. Snowed. We washed. Jasper brought wood. He was here for dinner. Mrs. Schoentzow called and payed me one \$1.00 she owed me, I called at Mrs. Walkers and brought Mrs. Roys dress home to make, went down town, got crackers .07 cents, cheese .17 cents, foolscap paper .01 cents, a bottle of Chamberlains immediate relief .25 cents.³

What is important to Grace DeCou, what does she see of her life? The weather, the names of people she visits with, and money, earnings and spendings. I gather that she and her mother live together and that her mother is widowed and she not married, but nowhere in the three years of this diary can I discover what are the arrangements concerning a farm for which she gives Jasper \$20 to pay the tax, who Jasper is or what he does aside from deliver

wood. That is the pattern of virtually all her entires: first the weather, then business, sewing and visits, then shopping. Sentence parts are short with almost no connectives except and: she uses few modifiers and a high proportion of short concrete nouns, pronouns and proper nouns, and verbs of simple action. Nouns and verbs repeated by refer to time, weather, money, business, domestic activities. Should anything out of the ordinary occur, that event is fitted as closely as possible into the pattern. Much later, Grace DeCou marries one T. H. Zintgraff and moves from Michigan to a suburb of Los Angeles. I do not know what it is T. H. Zintgraff does for a living, who he is, or what his whole name is; he weaves in and out of the periferia of her vision until mid-May of 1935, when he takes ill. The doctor gives him a hyperdermic. Grace the same week also entertains her visiting sister, goes to a community sing, and makes various purchases. T. H. worsens, there are more hyperdermics; he "seems to be crazy;" she says she can do nothing with him. Then, on Sunday, May 2: "Quite nice. T. H. is no better, just as crazy as ever broke a window pane with rocking chair. Mrs. Fisher Mrs. Alexander called, Miss Stanzel came to see my new stove. T. H. passed away this evening at 8 PM." So much for T. H. The funeral is on Tuesday ("was cremated, his wish") and on Friday she has a Mr. Wats put new glass in the window, ("cost 87 cents, putty and sale tax"). Grace DeCou's life has been made of hard work, meticulous care over small sums of money, an intricate network of friends, acquaintances, customers and relatives, and eventually marriage to a disagreeable and violent man. But more telling than these "facts" of her life is her perception of them, so apparently without selection or perspective. No one event appears to color or displace another--prices, visits, trips to town, the pattern invariably reasserts itself. Her habit is a very close focus, too close for generalizing or for revealing much

information to an outsider.

Such insistent pattern making is far more a mark of daily writing by women than by men. During the winter of 1895, Ben Goodwater was by himself in Grand Forks while Mamie Goodwater and their small son Whitcomb visited her relatives in Palmyra, Wisconsin, and he writes frequently to her:

Dear Wife: I will try and answer your letter tonight. I got yours today when I got home from the woods. You wanted to know how far I had to haul the wood. They call it eight miles but its nearer ten I think; it takes all day to make a trip. You wanted to know how much I could make a day. Some days I make more than others if I get on two cords I make \$1.50, if I get one, less. . . . The thermometer stood 40 below this morning when I started for the woods. You wanted to know how Sutherland got along. He has been hauling cord wood with me.

What Mamie wanted to know, I think, is the tenor of her husband's days, the pattern of recurring activities, and Ben writes as though to account for this pattern were something it would not have occurred to him to do unbidden. His usual bent is toward dramatic selection: potatoes frozen in the cellar, an infant dead of a house fire, Mrs. Hill chasing Nancy with a gun for going off with her son Tom.

In its concreteness, however, Ben Goodwater's writing is closer to that of the women I am describing than is the public style of the period. As a popular regional example I offer the History of the Red River Valley Past and Present by various writers, an anecdotal telling of immigrant settlements.⁵ There sentences are elaborately subordinated and often periodic, words latinate and polysyllabic, generalized phrases and passive constructions abound. Persons described (one woman only among them) are "prominent and solid," "busiest and most genial," "enterprising and wideawake." Farmers are "prosperous and well to do," "thrifty, bright, intelligent." One subject was orphaned young and "sent out into the world to hustle for himself." Sometimes wives are named, but seldom described:

they are "true helpers" and "genial ladies," but never active participants in whatever is meant by the valley's history. Grace DeCou, for her part, uses not one of the expressions I have culled about wideawake hustling citizens--it is as though two populations were living in each other's company but sharing no common perceptions.

Pattern-keeping is one striking characteristic of the writings of women, another is the strong presence of other women in their consciousness. Nearly all of Grace DeCou's visiting, sewing, and letter-writing involves women; I had to read a long time to realize that T. H. was a man she was married to. The presence of men is apt to be blurred, so strongly do women perceive themselves in the presence of other women, even in league with them. Between 1895 and 1904 Gwendoline Kinkaid (the person whom Mamie Goodwater was visiting in Wisconsin) wrote a great many letters, and long ones, to Mamie after her return to Grand Forks. Gwendoline displays her sense of presence, as well as her confidence in Mamie, by lighting now and then on the subject of birth control, that enterprise made commercially illegal by the passage of the Comstock Act in 1877. Gwendoline writes as though she and her acquaintances fairly consistently have pregnancy on their minds and, though she describes lovingly the antics of small children, she is almost never not dreading the prospect of another confinement. The women keep each other up to date. Thus Gwendoline writes to Mamie on March 17, 1895: "That is too bad about the woman being in the soup. Thank the lord I am not--I went over time that was all. Came around the 10th. Don't let anyone see this letter." And three months later:

No you will not have to come to a bee to my place. I want to know what you are going to fix me with. Sure that is the receipt I am using. You know we don't sleep together. Don't read aloud. I say that is a good reason you are using it because Ben is not to home. Oh say I have got another now. I bet you will laugh. Tell me how much faith you have in it. Just blow on your wrist.

Over the next six years Mamie has a second child and Gwendoline three, and Gwendoline writes to Mamie for more drastic measures than blowing on her wrist. "Are you all right yet. I am yet but one can never tell how long that will last" (1-10-01)---being "all right," or being "sick" (menstruating) or "going to be sick" (due to deliver) are recurring phrases over the years. On March 5, 1901, Gwendoline writes to Mamie:

I wish I could see you and find out your remedy. I think you might write it to me on an extra sheet and I will promise you I will not tell, for it isn't likely we will ever see each other again. I am so anxious to learn everything I can to prevent for I don't want to have any more. . . .Well good night and write soon, and don't forget to tell me all you know, and how did you find out so much out of a book.

A highly informed correspondent is Rose Williams, in Ohio, who in 1885 writes to her friend Allettie Mosher in North Dakota, widowed, with one child, and just re-married:

You want to know of a sure prevenative. Well plague take it. The best way is for you to sleep in one bed and your Man in another & bet you will laugh and say "You goose you think I am going to do that" no and I bet you would for I don't see any one that does. Well now the thing we (when I say we I mean us girls) is a thing: but it hasn't always been sure as you know but that was our own carelessness for it is we have been sure. I do not know whether you can get them out there. They are called Pessairre or female preverative if you don't want to ask for a "pisser" just ask for a female prevenative. They cost one dollar when Sis got hers it was before any of us went to Dak. The Directions are with it. . . .Reece just told me to tell you to wear a long night dress with a draw string at the bottom and a lock and key for if you was in separate beds you would crawl over together. (9-17-85)

This plain style, as well as the joking sexual frankness, is closely connected to a writer's perception of her social class. A correspondent who changes her style of writing as she changes her social aspirations is Aurie Carreau, in Grand Rapids and later Detroit, Michigan, who writes also to Allettie Mosher between 1918 and 1933. In particular, Aurie's manner of reacting to family deaths grows increasingly euphemistic; words

and phrases from public literature take the place, more and more, of conversational language. The first letter in the series, for October 7, 1918, tells of the death of "poor old Uncle": "We went out to see him twice while he was so bad," she reports, "and [he] complained we none of us come more often but my health has been so poorly up until we moved here the Dr told me to get where it was high and dry;" she is living "at the highest point in the city. . . and I am so much better which I am very thankful for. We got our car and that too I think has had a tendency to help me." The state of her health has somehow taken precedence over the death of her uncle, but in spite of the sentimental description of his dying ("he was glad to go he suffered terrible"), Aurie Carreau does tell of seeing him, of his wife's nursing, and of his feeling neglected. But typical of her writing is its gravitation towards her own affairs.---health, house and car, themes which she repeats often and which measure her idea of prosperity and social status. In the summer of 1926 she plans a trip by car to California: "I never saw anything like it we was in our front window on Sun nite and counted 118 autos in 1½ minutes so you know the traffic that goes past here and now they are packed with luggage going both ways from every state in the union". She is an onlooker to a more and more mobile, and dangerous, world.

Aurie Carreau's responses to family deaths, one is bound to observe, grow increasingly remote from her willing conscious experience. She writes on the death of Allettie Mosher's daughter Inez: "It is with regret I must write this letter to tell you how very sorry I am to hear of poor Inez death it is indeed sad . . . but God knows best and she has only gone to prepare the way for those left to mourn her loss." Aurie says she is busy,

sorry not to have written, "but my heart is always with you all. You see Leona went back to school last fall and she had made high school in 3 years carrying 7 solid subjects two side subjects" and the lead in a night school play, as well as A's and B plusses. Precisely as Aurie Carreau writes about her own affairs, she reacts distantly to the death of her friend's daughter. Her language is flat and abstract, her bragging tactless. She admonishes Inez's daughter (who herself has a child) to "be good so some day you can join dear mother in heaven." For Aurie Carreau, language is a mask for feeling, not an expression of it, and seemingly gives her little power.

Although none of my writers mentions imaginative literature, some of them compose letters which exceed, I think, the requirements of message-bearing. Jane Freeland is a writer who I see shaping materials as a professional writer would. A sister to Allettie Mosher's mother, Eliza Keyes, Jane Freeland lived with her husband on a canal boat in New York state. Her life is very hard and, to judge by handwriting and syntax, she has had little education. But she so re-lives an event in its telling, that we enter a scene as into a work of imaginative writing. She tells her sister just how it was her husband died:

I had been away from home to work. He didn't seem to be any worse than he had been. I bid him good by as we always did when going from each other. The day before he went out to his last prayer meeting he said as I was getting ready to go to work that morning was I going to Trudy's before I came home. I said I did not know he said why not go and see how they are. Well I said if you say so go I will I did go and when I got home at a quarter to 3 I found him sitting in his rocking chair as I thought at first look asleep. The color hadent all left his face he died with out a struggle he had done the hard chores and built a good fire for me for the last time. O what a shock it was to me I never shall get over. Blessed be they that die in the Lord.

What is it one is reading in diaries and letters by rural working women

in the last one hundred years? In some respects it is a literature of omissions. From the selections I have been quoting it would be difficult to deduce much information about economic or even domestic details of canal-boat life, of the dressmaking trade or of the progress of the auto industry, although all these subjects are ones our writers name often. Even less do we hear about national or local politics, and nothing of cultural or scientific events. Health and disease, the price of food, the manners of dying are the subjects which accumulate the most details, yet they leave us only with an accumulation, not an ordering or interpretation of them, a multitude of episodes and few stories. But if we are calling this a literature of omission, we need to wonder why it is these writings can effect us so, while satisfying few of the usual canons of literary composition.

They affect us partly, I think, by their inevitable self-assurance. It may of course be true that it took considerable determination to write at all, so that those who did not possess the trait are forever dumb; nevertheless the writers I have been reading appear solid in their own eyes. The details of their lives are hard, goodness knows, full of the concomitants of poverty: they moved often, lived in rented rooms and were separated for long periods from their husbands on seasonal work. Illnesses and deaths are staple subjects; there are family quarrels, disappointing offspring and fractious ageing parents, or, for the ageing, indifferent and interfering children. The weather can go from dreary to calamitous. Through it all women are not particularly cheerful, but neither are they at the mercies, nor too good for their lot in life. What they are, is sure of themselves. Nor do these women write in euphemisms; whatever they tell, they tell all, so that one is left to suppose that if there are

unmentionable subjects, these are simply not mentioned. I have heard people remark that the detailed and frequent descriptions of deaths and other horrors sound calous. I don't think they are meant to be, and would suggest that when it is not possible to mask the indignities of so much suffering, then the way to salvage self respect and sanity is to describe fully what is going on. And having described, there is no more to say. There may be also some comfort in writing it down; forming the event into sentences is a way of gaining control, when events themselves have proven so unruly.

Did you know Mrs. Wilson that used to live near Hope? They were Scotch people. They went to Manitoba a little more than a year ago. Word came a few days ago that she was insane she was at home alone she took the axe and chopped one of her knees through and cut the other limb badly. When they came home they found her lying on the ground she had fainted from loss of blood. She is now in the insane asylum at Brandon, Man. Some say it was religion that drove her insane but I don't think it was. (Emma Ladbury, Gallatin, ND, to Allettie Mosher, 1-23-99)

What she does think it was she does not say, but neither does she take refuge in explaining away Mrs. Wilson's hideous madness with "religion."

What is the source of such language, and what sources does it ignore? For it is so unlike any public writing of the period one can think of. The language of newspapers and other popular informative writing as typified by the Grand Forks Herald's river history, is generalized, ornate, hortatory, and the letters and diaries are not that. They do not even give advice or urge industry upon their correspondents (though letters between men often do so). On deaths there are occasional scriptural cadences, but devotional literature is seldom quoted. Nor is the behavior of characters in sentimental novels reflected in even the most scandalous goings-on: no fainting in fits, though people are reported very ill in disgusting and painful ways, they go mad, and they die on every hand.

Do we conclude, I wonder, that for practical purposes, the newspapers, devotional literature, and sentimental fiction hardly touched working people? Were the popularity of elocution and rhetoric attempts to improve by artificiality the working person's plain speech? These are complex questions in the history of style and of social class in America, which the reading of private chronicles by women bring to our attention.

The one source which I think does explain this spare, plain style is conversation; whenever writers mention writing, it is as a substitute for direct talk. Though there is frequent evidence that individual writers are conscious of shaping what they write, few worry about the letter form as such. They apologize for haste and poor penmanship, for using a pencil or blueing instead of ink, or not having enough paper; but grammar, spelling, vocabulary, sentence structure, standards of epistolary style, they do not mention. The care is all for essentials, muted though the effects may be. One wants to know this literature because, for these writers, it is all there is, and because it is the only direct source to lives which all other writers have had to imagine from the outside, whether in sympathy or in irony and the grotesque. One badly wants to hear them.

NOTES

¹Nancy F. Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood, "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835, Yale University Press, 1977; "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," Signs, Autumn 1975, 1-30; The Mamie Papers, ed. Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, The Feminist Press, 1977; Diaries by women listed in American Diaries in Manuscript, 1580-1945, A Descriptive Bibliography, by William Matthews, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974, tends also to be written by women of the upper classes.

²Marie Freeland to Eliza Keyes, nd 1866, Mosher Family Papers, Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection 463. Letters by Aurie Carreau, Jane Freeland, Emma Seaton, Emma Ladbury, Rose Williams are in the same collection.

³References to the diaries of Grace DeCou are to the DeCou Family Papers, OGL uncatalogued (as of June, 1978).

⁴LeRoy Goodwater Papers, OGL 368.

⁵2 volumes, Herald Printing Company, Grand Forks and Chicago, 1909.